



Jack Gilbert

Savage Romantic of Stubborn Gladness

*We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure,
but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have
the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless
furnace of this world.*

*Poetry should aspire to greatness. Poetry is not recreation, but about something
important, with nouns you can bite like coins to see if they're genuine. What
matters are perceptions about love or marriage or double-stranded states of the
spirit, delineated with pleasurable scantness of means.*

Poesy Café
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Presenter: Tom Corrado

Why Jack Gilbert?

Jack Gilbert was the real deal. He had a massive intellect and an ego to match. He was arrogant. Charismatic. He pissed off a lot of people. He pushed the envelope. He refused to settle for less. He was critical. He was defiantly unfashionable. He was dismissive of careerism and academia. He was committed - severely - to a life of poetry.

Finding Jack Gilbert

- *Monolithos* (Picked up a copy at Terri Tedeschi's North River Books in Albany, NY in the mid-80s)

- Stumbled upon this poem in a book of literary criticism in the mid-80s:

Divorce

Woke up suddenly thinking I heard crying.
Rushed through the dark house.
Stopped, remembering. Stood looking
out at bright moonlight on concrete.

- *Esquire* (Read in a barber shop in April 1994)

Trying to Have Something Left Over

There was a great tenderness to the sadness
when I would go there. She knew how much
I loved my wife and that we had no future.
We were like casualties helping each other
as we waited for the end. Now I wonder
if we understood how happy those Danish
afternoons were. Most of the time we did not talk.
Often I took care of the baby while she did
housework. Changing him and making him laugh.
I would say *Pittsburgh* softly each time before
throwing him up. Whisper *Pittsburgh* with
my mouth against the tiny ear and throw
him higher. *Pittsburgh* and happiness high up.
The only way to leave even the smallest trace.
So that all his life her son would feel gladness
unaccountably when anyone spoke of the ruined
city of steel in America. Each time almost
remembering something maybe important that got lost.

- Walking to my car after buying *Refusing Heaven* at Border's (2005), reading:

A Brief for the Defense

Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere. If babies
are not starving someplace, they are starving
somewhere else. With flies in their nostrils.
But we enjoy our lives because that's what God wants.
Otherwise the mornings before summer dawn would not
be made so fine. The Bengal tiger would not
be fashioned so miraculously well. The poor women
at the fountain are laughing together between
the suffering they have known and the awfulness
in their future, smiling and laughing while somebody
in the village is very sick. There is laughter
every day in the terrible streets of Calcutta,

and the women laugh in the cages of Bombay.
If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction,
we lessen the importance of their deprivation.
We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure,
but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have
the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless
furnace of this world. To make injustice the only
measure of our attention is to praise the Devil
If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down,
we should give thanks that the end had magnitude.
We must admit there will be music despite everything.
We stand at the prow again of a small ship
anchored late at night in the tiny port
looking over to the sleeping island: the waterfront
is three shuttered cafés and one naked light burning.
To hear the faint sound of oars in the silence as a rowboat
comes slowly out and then goes back is truly worth
all the years of sorrow that are to come.

About this poem, Elizabeth Gilbert, the *Eat, Pray, Love* author, commented, "There's maturity in it no youth could ever muster. It feels like something that should be in Ecclesiastes - it's biblical in its wisdom and scope. The poem takes on the central trauma of human consciousness, which is: What are we supposed to do with all this suffering? And how are we supposed to live?"

Jack Gilbert's Life

- 1925 Born on February 18th in Pittsburgh, PA
- 1940 Flunks out of Peabody High School; works as a Fuller Brush salesman, an exterminator, a steelworker
- 1945 Admitted into the University of Pittsburgh because of a clerical error; flunks out
- 1946 Moves to Paris
- 1947 Receives BA from the University of Pittsburgh
- 1954 Moves to San Francisco, attends San Francisco State, works with Ansel Adams, takes Jack Spicer's *Poetry as Magic Workshop*
- 1962 *Views of Jeopardy* (Reportedly one of the most stolen books from libraries)
- 1962 Receives Yale Series of Younger Poets Award

- 1962 Featured in a 28-page article by Gordon Lish in the first issue of *Genesis*
- 1962 Has photo shoots in *Glamour* and *Vogue*
- 1963 Receives MA from San Francisco State University
- 1964 Receives Guggenheim Fellowship (\$5000), leaves for Greece with former student Linda Gregg, bouncing intermittently to Copenhagen, where he writes two pornographic novels - published by Olympia Press, then to London, and back to Greece
- 1971 Ends relationship with Linda Gregg
- 1971 Marries Michiko Nogami, moves to Japan
- 1975 Lectures on poetry as part of 15-country tour for the State Department
- 1982 Michiko dies of cancer at age 36
- 1982 Teaches at Syracuse University
- 1983 Receives Stanley Kunitz Prize, the American Poetry Review Prize, and is a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry
- 1984 *Monolithos*
- 1984 *Kochan* (chapbook dedicated to Michiko Nogami)
- 1994 *The Great Fires*
- 1998 Moves to Northampton, MA, rents a small studio apartment from his friend Henry Lyman
- 1999 Appointed Grace Hazard Conkling writer-in-residence at Smith College
- 2000 Appointed Northampton (MA) Poet Laureate
- 2004 Appointed visiting professor and writer-in-residence at the University of Tennessee
- 2005 *Refusing Heaven*
- 2005 Receives the National Book Critics Circle Award
- 2006 *Tough Heaven: Poems of Pittsburgh*

- 2006 *Transgressions: Selected Poems (UK)*
- 2008 Moves to Berkeley, CA; diagnosed with Alzheimer's
- 2009 *The Dance Most of All*
- 2012 *Collected Poems*
- 2012 Dies at 87 on November 13th in Berkeley, CA
- 2013 Finalist for the Pulitzer Prize with the jury's citation: *... a half-century of poems reflecting a creative author's commitment to living fully and honestly and to producing straightforward work that illuminates everyday experience with startling clarity.*

Tidbits

Jack Gilbert never owned a house, drove a car only twice, began writing poetry at 15 after discovering T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound and, later, after befriending Gerald Stern.

Elizabeth Gilbert talked to *The Atlantic* about discovering Jack Gilbert when she occupied a rotating chair in creative writing at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, the position Jack Gilbert had occupied the year before: "I started asking around about him. It turned out that he'd made quite an impression on the students, and the things I heard about him fascinated me. Jack Gilbert hadn't taught them much about the business of poetry, or how to get published. Instead, he just tried to inspire them to have brave, full lives. One of the graduate students told me he grabbed her arm one day, as she was leaving class. 'Do you have the courage to be a poet?' he said. 'The jewels that are hiding inside you are begging you to say yes!' Because he said these kinds of things, the students were all very taken with him."

"I had the good fortune to meet Jack after a reading he gave at an ivy league school I was a sophomore attending a nearby mid-sized liberal arts college, and had gone to the reading with a few of my friends. Somehow we got up the guts to ask him out to a bar after the reading. He dithered a bit, explaining he'd love to go but he had a dinner to attend and a speech to give. Lucky for us, a black-clad ivy boy slid up and tried to ask Jack (no shit) if he thought his work was too hermeneutically inviting via his use of classical allusion; should he not actively resist such pre-determinacy? We got Jack (and his notebooks) to ourselves for the next six hours. He missed both the dinner and the speech. I've hung out with a lot of older poets before - but Jack was certainly the most generous, the most entertaining. He actually asked our opinions about poems in progress and debated our proposed changes with us, pimplly undergrads that we were." (R. J. McCaffrey)

According to Jack Gilbert

"Why not try to equal the Greeks? I want poems that matter - poems capable of changing a reader's life. Anything less is a waste of the reader's time."

"I am by nature drawn to exigency, compression, selection," he wrote. "One of the special pleasures in poetry for me is accomplishing a lot with the least means possible."

"I enjoyed being famous. Fame is a lot of fun, but it's not interesting. I loved being noticed and praised, even the banquets. But they didn't have anything that I wanted. After about six months, I found it boring. There were so many things to do, to live."

"If 99 percent of the poets writing today stopped publishing, it would not be a loss."

"I relish the physical surface of a woman, but I am importantly haunted by the ghost inside."

"The best thing I've ever known is to be with somebody, someone who is capable of love - second to that is to be alone."

"The only things really worth writing about are love, death, man, virtue, nature, magnitude, excellence, evil, suffering, courage, morality. What is the good life. What is honor. Who am I."

"Poetry is not a business with me. I'm not a professional of poetry; I'm a farmer of poetry."

Factoids

"Poetry, for Gilbert, was a witnessing to magnitude. It is the art of making urgent values manifest, and of imposing them on the reader. It is the housing of these values in poems so they will exist with maximum pressure, and for the longest time. It is the craft of doing so in structures that are a delight in themselves. And it is the mystery of fashioning poems in such a way that the form and the content are one." (Neil Astley)

"Gilbert wrote compellingly about passion, loss and loneliness. His poems are filled with a sense of wonder at existence and with his surprise at finding happiness - despite grief, struggle and alienation - in a life spent in luminous understanding of his own blessings and shortcomings. His work is both a rebellious assertion of clarity and a profound affirmation of the world in all its aspects." (Neil Astley)

"Gilbert was unique in that he was not a part of any literary school or group. He went his own way, and he lived pretty much entirely for his life and his art."
(Bill Mayer)

"Gilbert didn't like poets who had nice comfortable jobs at universities, and who wrote impressive-sounding poems about things that didn't matter much. . . . He said that most American poets didn't even actually want to write poems, but had to in order to keep getting grants and positions. He said: "If he's a man teaching at a university, as he probably is, and married to a wife he courted years ago, and has several quite healthy children . . . what's he going to make his poems out of? . . . He's unlikely to be what the Elizabethans admired so much, an over-reacher. You aren't likely to get a big-boned poem straining its limits. . . . They reduce poetry to something toilet-trained and comfortable." (The Writer's Almanac)

"Gilbert's poems about love, loss, and grief that defy all expectations of sentimentality are part of the larger poem, the poem that is the life of the poet, perhaps the most profound and moving piece of work to come out of American literature in generations." (Dan Albergetti)

"Gilbert isn't just a remarkable poet. He's a poet whose directness and lucidity ought to appeal to lots of readers . . . the poet who stands outside his own time, practicing a poetics of purity in an ever-more cacophonous world - a lyrical ghost, you might say, from a literary history that never came to be." (Meghan O'Rourke)

"He spent much of his career in self-imposed exile." (Laurel Maury) " . . . on remote Greek Islands, on a houseboat in Kashmir, on a western Massachusetts farm, and in the remote outskirts of Sausalito, California." (Sarah Manguso)

"Despite relationships that had all the signs of intimacy, Gilbert found the women he 'knew' unknowable. And so he may write: 'We are allowed / women so we can get into bed with the Lord, / however partial and momentary that is.' " (Sarah Manguso)

"Gilbert's place among the major voices of American poetry in the last half century is sometimes overlooked in critical appraisals of his work. . . . The reason, to a large degree, is that Gilbert, who from the beginning was a literary rebel among rebels, made many enemies among the literary establishment during his writing life. He was a poet of great talent with an intellect to match, who could easily intimidate others in the room, no matter who was gathered there. He also had a tremendous ego and could be withering in his attacks on his targets. He wrote poetry his way, and lived his life according to his own rules." (John Penner)

Jack Gilbert's Books

- 1962 *Views of Jeopardy* (Yale Younger Poets Series, nominated for Pulitzer Prize)

- 1984 ***Monolithos*** (Stanley Kunitz Prize and the American Poetry Review Prize; nominated for Pulitzer Prize, the American Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award)
- 1984 ***Kochan*** (limited edition chapbook of nine elegiac poems written for his wife, Michiko Nogami)
- 1994 ***The Great Fires***
- 2005 ***Refusing Heaven*** (National Book Critics Circle Award and the Los Angeles Times Book Award)
- 2006 ***Tough Heaven: Poems of Pittsburgh***
- 2006 ***Transgressions: Selected Poems (UK)***
- 2009 ***The Dance Most of All***
- 2012 ***Collected Poems*** (finalist for Pulitzer Prize)

Jack Gilbert's Poetry (*bolded = defining characteristics*)

1. "Gilbert's poetry is **plain-spoken, unmetered, pared to essentials.**" (Dwight Garner)
2. "The unique kernel of Gilbert's poetry is its **fearless exploration of the adult heart.**" (Sarah Manguso)
3. "He takes himself away to a place more inward than is safe to go; from that awful silence and tightening, he returns to us poems of **savage compassion.**" (James Dickey)
4. "Like the Beats he's fascinated by the possibility of **using emotion to travel the pathways of the mind**, 'like a man moving / through the woods thinking by feeling. The orchestra up in the trees, the heart below, step by step.' The result is work that attempts to see through life's surfaces and discover what is real and vital" (Laurel Maury)
5. "Unlike the Beats, however, whose poems were full of America, Gilbert's are **filled with Europe** - with Perugia, with Don Giovanni, with Île St. Louis, with the arcaded shadows of classical antiquities and 'their beautiful Latin,' and with the **consecrating principles of high modernism.**" (Meghan O'Rourke)
6. "Gilbert's work is distinguished by a **simple lyricism and straightforward clarity of tone.**" (Wikipedia)

7. **"Form is incidental to content in Gilbert's poems."** (Sarah Manguso)

8. "Using short line breaks and an **unfussy palette of images**, Gilbert's poetry has distilled a purity of emotion that **harkens back to the romantics** - Keats, Shelley, and Byron - except for something darker and woollier in his work. . . . For the past four decades, Gilbert has been fashioning **bitterly honest poems about his 'adult concerns,'** as he calls them - love and betrayal, grief and longing." (John Freeman)

9. "Almost all of his poems ultimately deal with the **commonest of themes: grief, loss, aging, the power of eros, delight in the physical world, and the absolute particularity of people and things.**" (David Dooley)

10. "Gilbert's **two most characteristic techniques** are the use of sentence fragments and abrupt shifts of topic. Rather than using **fragments and juxtapositions** to portray a disjointed universe, as Eliot does, Gilbert uses them to build new syntheses the rest of us have not had the wit or the experience to recognize. . . . The one authentic **twentieth-century American successor to the metaphysical poets**, he likes to investigate one kind of experience by considering it together with an entirely different kind of experience." (David Dooley)

11. "Gilbert's poems contain many of the elements of the **medieval Christian meditative tradition**. In his introduction to *The Meditative Poem*, Louis L. Martz describes this tradition as producing a poem 'in which a man projects a self upon a mental stage, and there comes to understand that self in the light of a divine presence.' For Gilbert, this presence is God, whom he addresses directly in colloquy, and also the presence of Nature." (Robert Peake)

12. "Gilbert is fascinated with mythology, but what moves him most are the **mythic moments people experience day to day, then lose**. 'I am haunted / by the day I walked through the Greek village ... and somebody began / playing Chopin, slowly, faintly. . . .' Gilbert believes that these moments of glory are the best we can hope for in life." (Laurel Maury)

13. "Gilbert's **passions recounted over a lifetime of loves and romantic upheavals**. His enormous relish for the physical world and his immaculate diction are about nothing less than 'searching for a baseline of the Lord.' " (Patricia Hampl)

14. "For Gilbert, **'the Lord' is the accumulated joys and griefs (and grievances) of a lifetime.**" (Kacie Lopez)

15. "What Gilbert is searching for, poem after poem, are the ideal circumstances where . . . the pleasures of austerity and the fecund, intoxicating powers of abundance intersect, and privation becomes a form of richness, a sharpening of the attention. He is often called a poet of loss, but his poems of loss **describe bereavement with a strange relish**. In fact, what differentiates Gilbert from the few poets who share his aims - say, Gary Snyder, W. S. Merwin, and A. R. Ammons - is

how obsessively and flintily he suggests that solitude is the only way to know one's place in the world." (Meghan O'Rourke)

16. "What Gilbert is trying to convey when he talks of **heart-breaking loss** is not the triumph or defeat of a superior emotion, but rather **the essence of what it means to be alive.**" (Kacie Lopez)

17. "If Gilbert is such a powerful poet, why isn't he more widely read today? There are the long silences, of course. More to the point, his lofty language is the vocabulary of a much older age. His poems' **stark simplicity** challenges the au courant assumption that surface complexity is desirable. This is why some critics dismiss Gilbert as sentimental; his vision is inflected by what Helen Vendler called '**romantic primitivism**,' an outlook that, to some readers, undoubtedly seems naive. (This is a poet who is disappointed to find 'pigeons' in San Francisco rather than elegant 'birds.')" (Meghan O'Rourke)

18. "Gilbert is also a **courtly celebrator of the wonders of a woman's body** (unlike any other poet writing today). 'The woman is not just a pleasure, / nor even a problem. She is a meniscus / that allows the absolute to have a shape, / that lets him skate however briefly / on the mystery, her presence luminous / on the ordinary and the grand.' " (Zach Kaufmann)

19. "Gilbert doesn't help his cause with his decidedly **old-fashioned obsession with women**. In nearly all his poems, women serve as vessels for accessing a vertiginous lyric intensity the poet can't derive anywhere else. . . . But I find Gilbert's obsession with women not only tolerable but compelling, partly because it's more self-conscious. Consider the poem 'Sects': 'It got me thinking of the failed denomination / I was part of: that old false dream of women. / I believed it was a triumph to have access to their mystery, to see the hidden hair, to feel their spirit topple over . . . / I had crazy ideas of what it was.' Gilbert's poems about women can, I think, be thought of as still lifes in the manner of visual arts, where we still find such deliberate, rational acts of paying reverence to female beauty acceptable - even expected. These poems are part and parcel of his larger project: rescuing from the debilitating forces of cynicism a conviction that transcendence can await us in this world. That notion, of course, went out of date somewhere around the time Gilbert began writing. But none of this matters to me when I read Gilbert. To call his poems sentimental is to close one's ears to the animating impulse of his work. His vision, at its most inclusive, is Horatian, teaching values that aren't often emphasized — staying abidingly true to his sense of solitary vocation, come what may. His poems are like the hopeful songs of a man clinging to the mast of a sinking ship. As he puts it in an early poem-manifesto 'The Abnormal is Not Courage,' what he is after is 'Accomplishment. The even loyalty. But fresh. / Not the prodigal son, nor Faustus. But Penelope. / The thing steady and clear. Then the crescendo.' It's not a fashionable stance, but it's an enduring one." (Meghan O'Rourke)

20. "I must say, though, that despite my joy with his verse, I do find **women here to be other-generationally treated**. They are, as they are in the work of many male writers within 10 years of his age, goddesses, often of thwarted desire, . . . really a figment of the poet's life as opposed to her own very specific persona. His reference to 'we' throughout the book is to a company of men. 'We are given women,' for example. Women, here, remain the other worldly objects of obtainability that I remember from my early readings of Roethke, Merwin, and Williams. Their function, while lyrically mastered, is so often relative only to their relationships with men. . . ." (Ruth Ellen Kocher)

21. "I must admit, there are poets that I love who are my 'dirty feminist secrets.' Poets who are not on the top ten lists of feminists and who in fact write about women in ways that I would consider **clearly anti-feminist**. Still I love them. This is the dissonance of ideology." (Julie R. Enszer)

22. "Gilbert engages us in a **stark, speculative, no-nonsense voice that wrestles with questions of morality, beauty, and existence**." (Peter Blair)

23. "Gilbert's is an **aesthetic of exclusion**." (Sarah Manguso)

24. "Gilbert has the gritty blue-collar background of someone like Philip Levine. . . It is this **lyrical mix of anguish and grace** that make Gilbert's poems so rewarding, and so heartbreaking. 'It is worth having the heart broken,' he writes in 'The Mistake.' 'A blessing to hurt for eighteen years because a woman is dead.' He is the **poet of restless remembering, of looking inward and living passionately**: 'We go hungry / amid the great granaries / this world is. . . We are taught to be / moderate. To live intelligently.' " (Zach Kaufmann)

25. "Strict meter and rhyme have virtually no place in Gilbert's methods. Nor is this purely 'free' verse, as each poem tends to be **consistent in line length on the page and to the ear**. . . There is little in the way of showy vocabulary: most of the poems have the feeling of having been turned and adjusted by careful degrees to their sparest elements, using the most direct words that will serve [his] purposes. . . This **reduction to essence is a recurring theme**." (George Wallace)

26. "Gilbert **excels at two kinds of poem**: the tight single run, . . . and the poem so chock full of things drawn from here and there and shoved in so rudely that they challenge the reader to find the universal in their furious, scattershot concreteness." (Calvin Bedient)

27. "But while Gilbert's desire for solitude could be considered 'greedy' in one sense, it should not be seen as selfish. His poems are never written for the pleasure or aggrandizement of the self, though he has been accused of sentimentality and solipsism by some critics. When asked in a 1996 interview about the poems that deal with his own experience, Gilbert claimed that the poems are not 'about him,' though he is in them. He insisted that they are about 'what is

important about what was happening.' Indeed, Gilbert's inward journey has always been less about himself and more about **understanding the universal human heart unpolluted by the distractions and temptations of modern life**. He has given up convenience and ease to record the depth of a human life for the good of us all. His poems are gifts." (Dan Albergetti)

28. "The poem, 'Michiko Dead,' deals with the aftermath of death. **To describe how one goes on after grief**, Gilbert uses the image of carrying a box. We all understand grief as heaviness; and in fact, the word for grief comes from the Latin *gravis*, meaning weighty, sad. The simile is introduced in the first line and then sustained and extended throughout the poem, to concretely and precisely evoke how the process of grieving feels from one day to the next. The heart is never finished with grief; that's the assertion of the poem. Though the burden is 'too heavy,' we manage it. A box is an apt image; we might think of a coffin, or a box of ashes. A heavy box might be filled with all our memories of someone, of the time we spent with them. The box in the poem is painful to carry, yet precious to the man who cannot, or will not, put it down." (Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux)

29. "But what of us who still have, we hope, a young heart and time? Who are in the midst of this desire, this feverous rage to live? This has always been the draw of Gilbert's poems: you are forced to unequivocally look into your own life and question it: **Am I truly living? Can I love my life and others?** Gilbert's poems suggest a satisfaction and peace with all he has done. For the rest of us, we may take Gilbert's final work as a guide, as in 'Ovid in Tears': 'Both the melody / and the symphony. The imperfect dancing / in the beautiful dance. The dance most of all' " (Ann Robinson)

30. "Gilbert's **fragmentary syntax**, for example, makes the poems more immediate. Gilbert believes it is the language that 'dances the reader into a condition where one is available to the subject matter....' Instead of being passive, it is vital for the reader to 'participate in the completion' of a poem. Once he has put the words to page, it is the reader's job to give life and emotional personal significance to the author's words. This **act of participation** puts the reader into the world of the writer, and connects writer to reader. Gilbert prefers his language **to enable communication between reader and subject**. A good example of this is in the poem, 'Marriage,' where the author's grief is more clearly stated through brief description of his irrational behavior after his wife's death, rather than pages of 'flowery elegy.'" (Kacie Lopez)

31. "Reading Gilbert's finest poems is like shaving with a razor that just nicks your skin. There's a **slight imperfection** in the blade. There's a bit of blood. . . . He is a beast bent on grace." (Dwight Garner)

32. "Gilbert is . . . a rarity, especially in this day and age: the poet who stands outside his own time, **practicing a poetics of purity** in an ever-more cacophonous

world - a lyrical ghost, you might say, from a literary history that never came to be." (Meghan O'Rourke)

33. "Why I like Jack Gilbert's poetry and why I think Jack Gilbert is one of the best American poets and why I publish Jack Gilbert's books is, was, and shall be to bring about the embarrassment of the power of discrimination in force in the assembly of fucking Harold Bloom's fucking canonicity list. The End." (Gordon Lish)

Takeaway

Jack Gilbert's poems are field notes on the examined life, brutally honest portrayals of love, loss, joy, sorrow, longing, loneliness, aging, grief, and betrayal. Despite their savage, cut-to-the-bone precision, there is little self-pity, but rather an exuberant, passionate celebration of a life lived fully.

Selected Poems

From *Views of Jeopardy*:

New York, Summer

I'd walk her home after work
buying roses and talking of Bechsteins.
She was full of soul
Her small room was gorged with heat
and there were no windows.
She'd take off everything
but her pants
and take the pins from her hair
throwing them on the floor
with a great noise.
Like Crete.
We wouldn't make love.
She'd get on the bed
with those nipples
and we'd lie
sweating
and talking of my best friend.
They were in love.
When I got quiet
she'd put on usually Debussy
and
leaning down to the small ribs
bite me.
Hard.

Between Poems

A lady asked me
what poets do
between poems.
Between passions
and visions. I said
that between poems
I provided for death.
She meant as to jobs
and commonly.
Commonly, I provide
against my death,
which comes on.
And give thanks
for the women I have
been privileged to
in extreme.

The Night Comes Every Day to My Window

The night comes every day to my window.
The serious night, promising, as always,
age and moderation. And I am frightened
dutifully, as always, until I find
in the bed my three hearts and the cat
in my stomach talking, as always now,
of Gianna. And I am happy through the dark
with my feet singing of how she lies
warm and alone in her dark room
over Umbria where the brief and only
paradise flowers white by white.
I turn all night with the thought of her mouth
a little open, and hunger to walk
quiet in the Italy of her head, strange
but no tourist on the streets of her childhood.

From *Monolithos*:

Walking Home Across the Island

Walking home across the plain in the dark.
And Linda crying. Again we have come
to a place where I rail and she suffers and the moon
does not rise. We have only each other,
but I am shouting inside the rain

and she is crying like a wounded animal,
knowing there is no place to turn. It is hard
to understand how we could be brought here by love.

More Than Friends

I was walking through the harvested fields
tonight and got thinking about age.
Began wondering if my balance was gone.
So there I was out in the starlight
on one foot, swaying, and cheating.

Trying to be Married

Watching my wife out in the full moon,
the sea bright behind her across the field
and through the trees. Eight years
and her love for me quieted away.
How fine she is. How hard we struggle.

From *The Great Fires*:

Married

I came back from the funeral and crawled
around the apartment, crying hard,
searching for my wife's hair.
For two months got them from the drain,
from the vacuum cleaner, under the refrigerator,
and off the clothes in the closet.
But after other Japanese women came,
there was no way to be sure which were
hers, and I stopped. A year later,
repotting Michiko's avocado, I find
a long black hair tangled in the dirt.

Alone

I never thought Michiko would come back
after she died. But if she did, I knew
it would be as a lady in a long white dress.
It is strange that she has returned
as somebody's Dalmatian. I meet
the man walking her on a leash
almost every week. He says good morning
and I stoop down to calm her. He said

once that she was never like that with
other people. Sometimes she is tethered
on the lawn when I go by. If nobody
is around, I sit on the grass. When she
finally quiets, she puts her head in my lap
and we watch each other's eyes as I whisper
in her soft ears. She cares nothing about
the mystery. She likes it best when
I touch her head and tell her small
things about my days and our friends.
That makes her happy the way it always did.

Measuring the Tyger

Barrels of chains. Sides of beef stacked in vans.
Water buffalo dragging logs of teak in the river mud
outside Mandalay. Pantocrater in the Byzantium dome.
The mammoth overhead crane bringing slabs of steel
through the dingy light and roar to the giant shear
that cuts the adamantine three-quarter-inch plates
and they flop down. The weight of the mind fractures
the girders and piers of the spirit, spilling out
the heart's melt. Incandescent ingots big as cars
trundling out of titanic mills, red slag scaling off
the brighter metal in the dark. The Monongahela River
below, night's sheen on its belly. Silence except
for the machinery clanging deeper in us. You will
love again, people say. Give it time. Me with time
running out. Day after day of the everyday.
What they call real life, made of eighth-inch gauge.
Newness strutting around as if it were significant.
Irony, neatness and rhyme pretending to be poetry.
I want to go back to that time after Michiko's death
when I cried every day among the trees. To the real
To the magnitude of pain, of being that much alive.

Betrothed

You hear yourself walking on snow.
You hear the absence of birds.
A stillness so complete, you hear
the whispering inside of you. Alone
morning after morning, and even more
at night. They say we are born alone,
to live and die alone. But they are wrong.
We get to be alone by time, by luck,

or by misadventure. When I hit the log
frozen in the woodpile to break it free,
it makes a sound of perfect inhumanity,
which goes pure all through the valley,
like a crow calling unexpectedly
at the darker end of the twilight that awakens
me in the middle of a life. The black
and white of me mated with this indifferent
winter landscape. I think of the moon
coming in a little while to find the white
among these colorless pines.

The Lord Sits with Me Out Front

The Lord sits with me out in front watching
a sweet darkness begin in the fields.
We try to decide whether I am lonely.
I tell about waking at four a.m. and thinking
of what the man did to the daughter of Louise.
And there being no moon when I went outside.
He says maybe I am getting old.
That being poor is taking too much out of me.
I say I am fine. He asks for the Brahms.
We watch the sea fade. The tape finishes again
and we sit on. Unable to find words.

Michiko Dead

He manages like somebody carrying a box
that is too heavy, first with his arms
underneath. When their strength gives out,
he moves the hands forward, hooking them
on the corners, pulling the weight against
his chest. He moves his thumbs slightly
when the fingers begin to tire, and it makes
different muscles take over. Afterward,
he carries it on his shoulder, until the blood
drains out of the arm that is stretched up
to steady the box and the arm goes numb. But now
the man can hold underneath again, so that
he can go on without ever putting the box down.

Tear It Down

We find out the heart only by dismantling what
the heart knows. By redefining the morning,

we find a morning that comes just after darkness.
We can break through marriage into marriage.
By insisting on love we spoil it, get beyond
affection and wade mouth-deep into love.
We must unlearn the constellations to see the stars.
But going back toward childhood will not help.
The village is not better than Pittsburgh.
Only Pittsburgh is more than Pittsburgh.
Rome is better than Rome in the same way the sound
of racoon tongues licking the inside walls
of the garbage tub is more than the stir
of them in the muck of the garbage. Love is not
enough. We die and are put into the earth forever.
We should insist while there is still time. We must
eat through the wildness of her sweet body already
in our bed to reach the body within the body.

From Refusing Heaven:

By Small and Small: Midnight to Four A.M.

For eleven years I have regretted it,
regretted that I did not do what
I wanted to do as I sat there those
four hours watching her die. I wanted
to crawl in among the machinery
and hold her in my arms, knowing
the elementary, leftover bit of her
mind would dimly recognize it was me
carrying her to where she was going.

Failing and Flying

Everyone forgets that Icarus also flew.
It's the same when love comes to an end,
or the marriage fails and people say
they knew it was a mistake, that everybody
said it would never work. That she was
old enough to know better. But anything
worth doing is worth doing badly.
Like being there by that summer ocean
on the other side of the island while
love was fading out of her, the stars
burning so extravagantly those nights that
anyone could tell you they would never last.
Every morning she was asleep in my bed

like a visitation, the gentleness in her
like antelope standing in the dawn mist.
Each afternoon I watched her coming back
through the hot stony field after swimming,
the sea light behind her and the huge sky
on the other side of that. Listened to her
while we ate lunch. How can they say
the marriage failed? Like the people who
came back from Provence (when it was Provence)
and said it was pretty but the food was greasy.
I believe Icarus was not failing as he fell,
but just coming to the end of his triumph.

Winning on the Black

The silence is so complete he can hear
the whispers inside him. Mostly names
of women. Women gone or dead. The ones
we loved so easily. What is it, he wonders,
that we had then and don't have now,
that we once were and are no longer.
It seemed natural to be alive back then.
Soon there will be only the raccoon's
tracks in the snow down by the river.

Naked Except for the Jewelry

"And," she said, "you must talk no more
about ecstasy. It is loneliness."
The woman wandered about picking up
her shoes and silks. "You said you loved me,"
the man said. "We tell lies," she said,
brushing her wonderful hair, naked except
for the jewelry. "We try to believe."
"you were helpless with joy," he said,
"moaning and weeping." "In the dream," she said,
"we pretend to ourselves that we are touching.
The heart lies to itself because it must."

A Taste for Grit and Whatever

More and more it is the incidental that makes
him yearn, and he worries about that.
Why should the single railroad tracks
curving away into the bare December trees
and no houses matter? And why is it

the defeated he trusts? Is it because
Pittsburgh is still tangled in him that he
has the picture on his wall of God's head
torn apart by jungle roots? Maybe
growing up in that brutal city left him
with a taste for grit and whatever it was
he saw in the titanic rusting steel mills.
It might be the reason he finally moved out
of Paris. Perhaps it is the scale
of those long ago winters that makes him
restless when people laugh a lot.
Why the erotic matters so much. Not as
pleasure but a way to get to something darker.
Hunting down the soul, searching out the iron
of Heaven when the work is getting done.

From *The Dance Most of All*

The Spell Cast Over

In the old days we could see nakedness only
in the burlesque houses. In the lavish
theaters left over from vaudeville,
ruined in the Great Depression. What had been
grand gestures of huge chandeliers
and mythic heroes courting the goddess
on the ceiling. Now the chandeliers were grimy
and the ceilings hanging in tatters. It was
like the Russian aristocrats fleeing
the Revolution. Ending up as taxi drivers
in Paris dressed in their worn-out elegance.
It was like that in the Pittsburgh of my days.
Old men of shabby clothes in the empty
seats at the Roxy Theater dreaming
of the sumptuous headliners
slowly discarding layers of their
lavish gowns. Baring the secret
beauty to the men of their season.
The old men came from their one room
(with its single, forbidden gas range)
to watch the strippers. To remember what used
to be. Like the gray-haired men of Ilium
who waited each morning for Helen
to cross over to the temple in her light raiment.
The waning men longed to escape from the spell
cast over them by time. To escape the imprisoned

longing. To insist on dispensation. To see
their young hearts just one more time.
Those famous women like honeycombs. Women moving
to the old music again. That former grace of flesh.
The sheen of them in the sunlight, to watch
them walking by the sea.

South

In the small towns along the river
nothing happens day after long day.
Summer weeks stalled forever,
and long marriages always the same.
Lives with only emergencies, births,
and fishing for excitement. Then a ship
comes out of the mist. Or comes around
the bend carefully one morning
in the rain, past the pines and shrubs.
Arrives on a hot fragrant night,
grandly, all lit up. Gone two days
later, leaving fury in its wake.

Cherishing What Isn't

Ah, you three women whom I have loved in this
long life, along with the few others.
And the four I may have loved, or stopped short
of loving. I wander through these woods
making songs of you. Some of regret, some
of longing, and a terrible one of death.
I carry the privacy of your bodies
and hearts in me. The shameful ardor
and the shameless intimacy, the secret kinds
of happiness and the walled-up childhoods.
I carol loudly of you among trees emptied
of winter and rejoice quietly in summer.
A score of women if you count love both large
and small, real ones that were brief
and those that lasted. Gentle love and some
almost like an animal with its prey.
What is left is what's alive in me. The failing
of your beauty and its remaining.
You are like countries in which my love
took place. Like a bell in the trees
that makes your music in each wind that moves.

A music composed of what you have forgotten.
That will end with my ending.

From *Collected Poems*:

Getting Old

The soft wind comes sweet in the night
on the mountain. Invisible except for
the sound it makes in the big poplars outside
and the feel on his naked, single body,
which breathes quietly a little before dawn,
eyes open and in love with the table
and chair in the transparent dark and stars
in the other window. Soon it will be time
for the first tea and cool pear and then
the miles down and miles up the mountain.
"Old and alone," he thinks, smiling.
Full of what abundance has done to his spirit.
Feeling around inside to see if his heart
is still, thank God, ambitious. The way
old men look in their eyes each morning.
Knowing she isn't there and how much Michiko
isn't anywhere. The eyes close as he remembers
seeing the big owl on the roof last night
for the first time after hearing it for months.
Thinking how much he has grown unsuited
for love the size it is for him. "But maybe
not," he says. And the eyes open as he
grins at the heart's stubborn pretending.

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